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The Queer Innocence of *Giovanni's Room* by James Baldwin

When first reading James Baldwin's novel, *Giovanni's Room*, I was struck by a particular phrase which stoked my curiosity. The passage shows David, our narrator, recalling a conversation he had about his lover, Giovanni, after he was sentenced to be executed. In it, David's friend Jacques remarks upon the garden of Eden and its temporary nature. The narrative breaks focus from the past to allow for this moment of David's introspection, in the present. During this time, David says:

Nobody stays in the garden of Eden. Jacques' garden was not the same as Giovanni's, of course. Jacques' garden was involved with football players and Giovanni's was involved with maidens ... Perhaps everyone has a garden of Eden, I don't know ... Perhaps life only offers the choice of remembering the garden and forgetting it ... People who remember court madness through pain, the pain of the perpetually recurring death of their innocence (Baldwin, 25).

This passage emerged as a site of interest for me due to the framing of loss of innocence as "perpetually recurring." By representing a loss of innocence in this way, Baldwin suggests innocence itself to be repetitive. It is not something which is simply lost, it can be found again. This notion complicates the idea of innocence in literature as we are familiar with it. Going back to the story of Adam and Eve (referenced by David and Jacques in this passage), we see innocence lost as a result not only of sin, but of acquiring knowledge. Milton reiterates the same

story in *Paradise Lost*. Similarly, a loss of innocence via sexuality is required by the “coming of age” narrative or the “marriage plot” which follow a character from childhood to adulthood. Even at the time of Baldwin’s writing, “loss of innocence” is recognizable as a main trope in many novels, present in works which now define classic 20th century literature: *The Catcher in the Rye*, *A Separate Peace*, *East of Eden*, et cetera. Despite the range of texts which share an interest in this theme, there is a similar evaluation between them: innocence in literature is familiar as something whose loss is compulsory.

From this stance, *Giovanni’s Room* makes some sort of departure. Not only does the novel lack a typical “loss of innocence” character arch, but Baldwin’s presentation of loss of innocence (and therefore, of innocence itself) as perpetually recurring complicates a dominant idea in literature: that of innocence lost and not to be found again. This repetitive structure bears similarities to the temporal organization of the narrative, which is framed by a present tense yet constantly returning to the past, at varying depths.

In thinking about these themes, *Giovanni’s Room* is a peculiar focus, also, due to the subject matter with which it engages. One might feel compelled to wonder where there is room for innocence in a novel about love and desire between adult men, especially when one of these men is later tried for murder. The dissonance here is integral to Baldwin’s engagement with innocence, and it is for this reason that I find myself working most with those experiences that are figured oppositionally to innocence: shame, guilt, knowledge and desire. By working with these topics, I investigate through my thesis, a “queer innocence,” one which is inextricably linked to desire and which will occur over and over again for the narrator, David.

A definitive trait of *Giovanni's Room* is the non-normative narrative structure Baldwin employs. The reader is situated, at the novel's beginning, in the present tense. We meet our narrator, David, as he stands in his room, and there is a sudden sense of doom conveyed. David says he is awaiting "the most terrible morning of [his] life" (Baldwin, 1). It only takes the reader a few more pages to find out that this is due to the fact that a man named Giovanni is about to be executed. The novel's beginning sets the stage for us to enter into David's memories, as there is a strong element--both literal, and figurative--of reflection. There is the "darkening gleam of the window pane" through which David watches his reflection, and the self-examination which perhaps is encouraged by this action. In this way we are led into David's memory, however, this is done with some air of intention. His language verges on the confessional, and we shift to the past tense through some sort of admission of guilt. "I repent now--for all the good it does--one particular lie among the many lies I've told, told, lived and believed. This is the lie which I told to Giovanni but never succeeded in making him believe, that I had never slept with a boy before" (Baldwin, 6). David then goes on to tell us about Joey, the first boy he had sex with. What this opening section tells me is that *Giovanni's Room* is really set up to be a story about guilt: David's guilt for his behavior which proved so harmful, but also the guilty verdict which Giovanni has received and which leaves him awaiting the guillotine.

David's position as a present tense narrator looking into the past gives the feeling that he is reporting his experience after some transformative episode of his life. There is very much a feeling of "before and after" produced by the conference between himself and his reflection. This is asserted as a structural level, within the language. "I am--or I was--one of those people who pride themselves on their willpower ... People who believe that they are strong-willed and the

masters of their destiny can only continue to believe this by becoming specialists in self-deception” (Baldwin, 20). Of course, there are many people throughout the novel who are deceived by David. Hella, the fiancée who he claimed to be in love with; David’s father, who is lead to believe in a fictional, idealized life for his son; and Giovanni, when David promised he would stay with him. But of the many characters who are subject to David’s lies he, himself, is the prime example. David, as he said, is “too various to be trusted,” and in this quality we see him treat himself as the Other.

As the present tense situates David in front of that mirror-like window, it is the temporal location of reflection and, therefore, of knowledge. Even when the narrative shifts to become deeply involved with the past, the present tense is still the space of self-interruption. This is evident when we are introduced to David’s friend Jacques, who is represented as a somewhat ridiculous, and at times grotesque, character. “Jacques is not too bad ... he was silly but he was so lonely; anyway, I understand now that the contempt I felt for him involved my self-contempt” (Baldwin, 23). The way David locates the reader in time, prefacing with “now,” indicates a development or change in his thought process that has occurred since the past episode which he describes. In this way, the present tense emerges as a site of knowledge in this novel.

My claims surrounding “queer innocence” qualify it as follows: 1.) queer innocence is multiply occurring (this, as implied by its “perpetually recurring death”). The non-normativity of this depiction of innocence is in its displacement from the past, particularly, from childhood; 2.) it is itself an object of desire. Much as David might To discuss both of these issues (only a sample of those involved by this term), I want to point to a section from the book’s beginning,

when David and Jacques first go to a bar, owned by a man named Guillaume. There is a sense of latent discovery present in this scene, one which is connected to David's navigation of sexuality. When David arrives, he feels as though he is under the surveillance of the other men there. "It was as though they were the elders of some strange and austere holy order and were watching me in order to discover, by means of signs I made but which only they could read, whether or not I had a true vocation" (Baldwin, 27). David identifies as heterosexual, and his entry into a queer space is represented here as an initiation, of sorts. Here, sexuality is framed as a discovery.

When David first meets Giovanni, we see a time of new beginnings, filled with hesitancy. "'Don't you know when you have made a friend?' [Giovanni] said, 'what is this thing about time? ... People are always saying, we must wait, we must wait. What are they waiting for?'" (Baldwin, 37). David's painful self-consciousness, being the center of attention, frames his meeting Giovanni as an event which would require spectators. "I watched [Giovanni] as he moved. And then I watched their faces, watching him. And then I was afraid. I knew that they were watching, had been watching both of us. They knew that they had witnessed a beginning and now they would not cease to watch until they saw the end" (Baldwin, 38). It is through this that their relationship is marked as having a transformative quality.

This is when the reader becomes acquainted with the "bar mummy," who appears as some sort of messenger. David says, "Now someone who I had never seen before came out of the shadows toward me. It looked like a mummy or a zombie ... or something walking after it had been put to death" (Baldwin, 38). This character is marked not only by their "slow motion" movement, but also by their queerness. David comments on the mummy's effeminate clothing and "coquettish" mannerisms, despite their anatomical masculinity. The androgynous "bar

mummy” seems to inhabit a status of “undead.” We are unable to locate the mummy temporally, as he possess what David describes as the “sorrow of infants and of very old men” (Baldwin, 40). Here we are introduced to a feeling of liminality, of “suspension”: the “bar mummy” is neither young nor old, alive nor dead. He is also the first to announce danger. This “bar mummy” comments on David’s relationship with Giovanni, saying, ““For a boy like you--he is *very* dangerous”” (Baldwin, 40). There is a delivery of information here, though David ignores it.

While David and Giovanni’s meeting is marked by a sense of danger and surveillance, it is also a site of conflict between confusion and knowledge. This sentiment is echoed by Jacques as David reunites with him. Jacques says, ““Everyone in the bar is talking about how beautifully you and the barman have hit it off ... I trust there has been no confusion?”” (Baldwin, 40). Here the element of confusion is attached to David’s feelings of desire. David defends himself against these accusations by warning Jacques not to ““go getting confused, either”” (Baldwin, 41). In this negotiation of knowledge and confusion, there is a quality near childishness.

Like the garden of Eden, Guillaume’s bar represents a space for David which is full of both temptation and danger, and these elements meet in the figure of Giovanni. The temptation, of course, is in the desire he invokes in David. The danger, though, is very much as the bar mummy describes. Here we see some sort of foreshadowing, most obviously in the warning the bar mummy gives to David. However, the sense of dislocation (?) that is conveyed through the bar mummy--it’s gender liminality but also its occupation of some space outside of time--speaks to an overwhelming affective quality of the novel. And that is the suspension in the hovering the mummy does, between genders, between ages, between the status of living and dead. It is this same feeling of stasis which possesses some of the other characters who frequent Guillaume’s

bar. Characters like Jacques and even Giovanni, who seem to have been inundated into the same space as the bar mummy.